The Heart of Hamlet.

A MOVING CHAPTER IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF THE TRAGEDIAN EDWIN BOOTH TOLD IN LETTERS TO RICHARD HENRY STODDARD THE POET

EDWIN BOOTH, AS HE APPEARED IN 1886, AT THE TIME HE FORMED A PARTNERSHIP WITH LAWRENCE BARRETT. FROM A PHOTOGRAPH IN THE COLLECTION OF W. W. NESBIT, ST. LOUIS.

RICHARD HENRY STODDARD.

"BUT I HAVE THAT WITHIN, WHICH PASSETH SHOW; THESE, BUT THE TRAPPINGS AND THE SUITS OF WOE." HAMLET, ACT I, SCENE II

C. H. Nellington

MRS. MARY DEVLIN BOOTH. FROM THE COLLECTION OF ALFRED BECKS.

EDWIN BOOTH IN THE EARLY SIXTIES. FROM A PHOTOGRAPH IN THE COLLECTION OF COL. J. ALLSTON BROWN.

WRITTEN FOR THE SUNDAY REPUBLIC.

In the written drama there is no mystery greater than the mystery of the heart of Hamlet.

Here we have the greatest Hamlet of modern times laying bare to us the unsuspected depths and darkest struggles of his soul—the soul of Edwin Booth.

He is ten years in his grave, and he was 60 when he died; his honors have been reaped and winnowed, and the clear golden grains of his fame as a tragic actor and as a noble man remain.

Not, however, with the Booth of his later mellowed and heavily laureled years have we to do, but with the fiery, magnetic, impulsive and yet not fully self-disciplined Booth of forty years ago—Booth as he was in 1863—Booth in the vigor of his fresh manhood, in his thirtieth year, successful as an actor, the direct inheritor of his great father's fame.

A crushing blow had fallen upon him, not comparable in its message of woe perhaps with the dread disaster that came two years later, when Abraham Lincoln fell under the pistol of his brother, John Wilkes Booth; but how it reached down to the very depths of the nature of this young Hamlet may be seen.

Mary Devlin, the devoted, charming wife of scant three years, lay dead in Dorchester, Mass., with Edwin away in New York, though her child, Edwina, a year and a half old, was with her.

Edwin's wooing of the lovely Mary, who had been an actress, was an idyl; her death took on the notes of tragedy:

O, dear Ophelia, I am ill at these numbers; I have not art to reckon my groans, but that I love thee best, O most best, believe it. Adieu.

This heart cry seems to run through all that follows, although no suspicion of a histrionic side to his grief and his more bitter self-reproach is apparent.

He quotes but rarely; he is ill and suffers. "I love thee best, O, most best, believe it."

Only after forty years shall the world know the tragedy of that love as revealed in a mass of letters, now archived in the Authors' Club and given to the club by the late Richard Henry Stoddard shortly before his death.

LETTERS TO THE STODDARDS.

Of all the rare things belonging to the Stoddard collection none are so reverently guarded as these time-worn letters.

The letters were written daily and oftener by Booth to Richard Henry or Elizabeth Stoddard.

Hitherto unpublished because of their most personal and intimate character, the material is now loosed to literature by the death of the last member that memorable three.

The letters may no longer be regarded as sacred to the correspondents, but as a rich legacy to the public which gave to all three a beautiful devotion and an unfeigned admiration.

The collection includes but a single letter of Stoddard's, and that was written under the painfullest circumstance. There are years of letters from Booth and the Stoddards, and many from Mary Devlin, written the year before her death, and her letters, discoursing of nothing but "Edwin," throw marvelous side light upon a character dazzlingly illuminated by his own hand.

Over the Stoddard side of the story some yet unfolded mystery hangs.

Here was warm and intimate friendship suddenly snapped.

The wreck of it is mentioned in the only Stoddard letter in the collection. How or why it came thus to grief is not told.

How completely the poet had put it from him may be guessed in the fact that the "Recollections Personal and Literary, by Richard Henry Stoddard," published only a week ago, contains no single reference to Edwin Booth.

It is not possible to discuss here or quote from all of Edwin Booth's letters. That which may be written should be reading light of some knowledge of his and Mary Devlin's brief life together and of its other history.

What the short years of the marriage meant to both, of joy and happiness, of torture and patience, love and remorse, is exposed, naked, in these strained lines of emotional abandon, written by Booth in a very delirium of sorrow.

The first of the letters was written the week after Mary Devlin's death. Compared with those that follow the letter is temperate and reserved in tone.

His agony is betrayed, but not as it is later—desperately, madly.

In that first letter he speaks of the immediate circumstances of her death. Certain "d—d good natured friends" had carried certain disturbing stories to her, which, in her enfeebled condition, Booth believed had killed her.

Booth's bitterness is painful enough without inquiring too closely into its cause.

He at first discusses, calmly, the most trivial matters, his wardrobe, and so forth, but finally all his self-repression gives place to an abandon of grief.

He tells of handling her "things," of putting them away, of the value to him of the least of the articles that she has touched; of the finding of their marriage certificate to which he had tied the key of her coffin.

He pins to paper all the morbid horror of his mind.

IN THE ROLE OF FATHER.

My child should be a solace to me—but she, alas! was my child, my baby wife, and no other can fill her place!

Had she been less childlike in her manners—you see I had raised her almost from a baby and she had grown to regard me as a father long before we married—had she been more sedate and matronly doubtless the baby would more engross all my thoughts * * * but now I feel as though my child was dead and Edwina's sweetness makes me sad rather than cheerful.

And then he adds, with a simplicity that is plaintive rather than grotesque:

"We had fish for dinner; the Tompkinses are gone—we are alone."

Then with startling transition:

"What do they pue people in the ground for? They don'tknow. My father planted a penny ones, expecting to find a guinea in the spring—but it wouldn't wash; would to God, Dick, that you and I could cultivate coffins—eh?

Now in the wild discord of the man's soul began to sound that weird note of superstition which presently dominated all that he thought or wrote or did. Again he wrote:

My Dear Dick: Your good long letter came yesterday. You only acknowledge the second of my letters. Did not the first reach you? I go to town to-day for the first time, to unpack my French wardrobe; I wonder if Mollie (the per name of his wife) will be present when I do it, and whether she will like the dresses I bought merely to please her.

T— says Mrs. W— is in town; I expect her out here this morning if that's the case. Why is it, I wonder, that neither they (the girls who pretended to be so full of Mollie) or L— have given me a line? No matter, we all must go and be forgotten; don't speak to them about it. I'd not have anything in the way of mock sympathy forced from any one. I speak more in relation to the girls than F—. By the bye, you spoke of a piece he had written for one of the papers; you did not send me that. Why not? I wish to gather and preserve all that relates to her. How do we know, Dick, that that thrill of electricity (for I can think it nothing more) had anything to do with the departed? No. I do not think that Mary has yet, or ever will to me, make herself manifest. I don't think I'm worthy of it. I think she has abandoned me forever * * * I must see Elizabeth's poem on Mollie. Won't you write something for her, too? * * * I'm very dull and spiritless to-day and must give you only a few hasty lines in acknowledgment of the consoling one you sent me yesterday. Only think of being invited out to meet company at dinner at this time! Are there not people in this world whose souls are formed of mud as well as their bodies? I think so. I have declined an invitation to meet the W—s and others at dinner to-morrow—boorish, ain't it? * * * I have upset Thompson's work on "Hamlet," haven't I? A letter from M— yesterday says J— is very kindly disposed toward me; that he says he owes me $400, but won't pay till he and I have a talk over matters, etc., etc. Do you not think that I might break the contract obtained when I was not in my proper senses and let him bring suit against me?

You understand how the matter stands; think it over and give me your ideas in reference to it. I think I can do it with impunity. Somebody has called—Mrs. W— probably—yes, 'tis she, and I must leave you for awhile. Goodby, Dick! Mrs. W— is upstairs with baby and will soon be down, so I must close to entertain her. She tells me Wilson is expected to sit up and "tea" this evening. I hope I'll keep up. Love to him and Lisbeth. Adieu! I'll write more at length, perhaps to-night. S— has not written. Strange people in this world, are there not? Love to friends. Write long and often. My things had better be with me. They should be hung up during the summer.

The inability here plainly expressed to perceive his own responsibility, as well as his ability to appreciate another man's commercial trick, is painfully characteristic of Booth's limitations, and yet this indicates rather a timidity of temperament, which ever caused him to shrink from the burden of his faults, rather than an oblique way of looking at the moralities.

In the following letter he first reveals that fearful capacity for morbid self-tormentings which was his.

When he projects himself thus into a hell so painstakingly and elaborately made by himself for himself, we may be said to witness the very extreme of luxurious woe:

HIS LOVE FOR MARY DEVLIN.

March 11, 1863.—Dear 'Lisbeth: I fancy—I hope it is but fancy—that you are a little annoyed with me. I judge from the close of your letter simply. I suppose I am more than usually sensitive just now. This morning brought me a letter from Dick, with your poem. You know how I judge of things. What I like I like, be it great or little. In my poor judgment, therefore, I must say you have shown more thought than Parsons, * * * although I fancy his may be the more taking with the mass because it has a greater jingle. Is this true criticism?

Don't be alarmed for me, 'Lisbeth. I am sure that when I get to work again I shall be able to look calmly back on things that were, nor wish them present. Already I begin to feel the strong conviction that this is best. Mary's love was too deep, too holy, for such a selfish, beastly being as I am. When I recall the many sad trials I have given her, and the little joy, save in her own devotion, she derived from her connection with me, I cannot but think God removed her to save her from a life of misery, perhaps, for although my love was deep-rooted in my soul, yet I could never show it; I was ever cold, indifferent, and even have made her weep most bitterly when, like a statue, I received her deep devotion. Yes, it is right, it is just. The trouble here, forgetfulness, is like a nightmare to me; but if in the time to come I should, amid the excitement of the world and my profession, cease to think of her, that would be damnable.

This fear is as great a burden to me, almost, as her absence is. I look back now, but only occasionally, to my youthful days, when I lost my father in just the same manner; with the same disease he died, a father most dearly, fondly loved. I look back without a tear, without a sigh, and it is difficult at this time even to recall his features. Great God! Will this ever be the case with Mary? I lay awake last night reading a book she used to read, and, falling asleep, I dreamed, not of her, as I had hoped I would, but of Wilson.

I thought he came into my room, pale, but well, and in the act of buttoning his vest, saying, "You didn't expect me, did you?" I thought we sat and "tea'd" together. Is he well? I hope so.

Now, I hope Dick will set to work and say something for Mary. It is sweet to know how deeply she was loved. Poetry conveys to me a clearer insight of the heart than words or tears or protestations of any kind. I suppose this is but fancy, too, but so it is. If I were a poet I could tell you how I loved my bird; but as it is I can only say I loved, and let you guess how deeply.

This is a miserable day. Spring has not yet begun to write my darling's epitaph in flowers; a cold white shroud still wraps earth and the winds are moaning winter's requiem. At least, I hope so, for it is time he was gone; and although the sunshine seems sadder to me now than shadow, I shall be glad when I can reckon this season with the past. God bless you. Write. Love to Dick.

EDWIN.

The closing sentences of this letter sound the only artificial note in the entire collection. The perfect poetry of the man was so much greater than the poetry of art; and those final lines are the only indications of any effort on his part, at any time, to affect the orante in literature. It is his only failure.

A whole universe of tragedy is revealed in those words. "Little joy, save in her own devotion, she derived from her connection with me."

Later Booth writes a letter that sug-

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